

Oh, Henry!

**In its new location on Routes 11 and 30,
Manchester's Bistro Henry is bigger and better than ever.**

Story by Philip Monahan / Photographs by Vermont Magazine staff

THE LIFE OF A RESTAURANT chef-owner, decked out in clean whites and directing crews on both sides of the kitchen door, seems romantic and glamorous in movies and on TV—and sometimes even to the customers in the dining room. It does to me, anyway. So when I walked through the back door of Manchester's Bistro Henry one afternoon and encountered a woman scrubbing pots and a man fiddling at the prep table, I politely asked where I could find Henry and Dina Bronson, the restaurant's proprietors. Surely, they'd be huddled over a saucepan

concocting some exciting new sauce or tasting the latest vintage Bordeaux? As I peered deeper into the kitchen, hoping for a glimpse of a tall white toque, the woman at the sink smiled wryly and started to dry her hands.

Actually, the pot-scrubber and prep cook were the Bronsons, making it clear that any glamour that comes from running your own restaurant in the real world is backed up by long hours of hard work behind the scenes. The couple enjoyed a good chuckle at my expense before Henry grabbed a bottle of sparkling water out

of the walk-in and led me into the dining room for a chat. Dina had a wedding cake to construct.

IT'S APPROPRIATE THAT I FOUND the Bronsons with their noses to the grindstone, for Henry owes his success more to hard work, experience, and devotion to his craft than to any formal culinary schooling. At the age of 16, he went to work for a French chef in his hometown of Woodstock, New York, mostly because his mother hoped that he'd learn to speak French better. Two weeks into the job,



Henry and Dina Bronson moved to Southern Vermont from New York City more than 10 years ago. Their bistro has been a mainstay of Manchester's fine-dining scene, and can now accommodate more diners in its larger space.

however, the chef burned himself badly, so, as Henry puts it, “I was his hands.” Sitting on a stool, with his arms in bandages, the chef gave Henry a crash course in French cuisine. Later, he continued his training at an Italian restaurant.

He eventually made his way to New York City, where he served under famed Mexican chef Zarela Martinez and one of the gurus of New American cuisine, John Terczak. He also did time as the only white chef at a high-end Chinese restaurant. He jokes that when people ask him where he got his culinary degree, he tells them “The Cooking School of the Kitchen.”

It was in a Manhattan kitchen that he met Dina, a pastry chef and graduate of the New York Restaurant School. After a few more years of climbing the professional culinary ladder in the Big Apple—culminating in Henry’s job as the head chef at a 1,200-room midtown hotel—they decided it was time to move to the country.

A classified ad led them to The Inn at Willow Pond in Manchester, where they ran a popular restaurant called Dina’s for two years, until the inn was sold to new owners. Thus in 1993 was born the first incarnation of Bistro Henry, tucked into the understated Chalet Motel on Routes 11 and 30. The restaurant was easy to miss if you weren’t looking for it, but the quality of the food soon brought a steady stream of diners.

In July 2003, after 10 years of waiting for the right opportunity, the Bronsons moved the restaurant to its new home, right up the street. Now in its own, larger building in a conspicuous spot on 11 and 30, Bistro Henry has taken its rightful place as one of the cornerstones of Manchester’s fine-dining scene.

The new, multi-level space is both airy and intimate, and it’s divided into a small bar, three separate dining rooms, and a function room. When Henry and Dina were choosing paint for the walls, they settled on a pleasant color called “lobster bisque,” which just happens to be one of Henry’s signature dishes. (When asked if that was a coincidence, Henry just smiles.) The walls are lined with fine-art posters advertising old French shipping companies and wines.

But don’t let the restaurant’s name, the artwork, or the escargot appetizer fool you: Bistro Henry is not a French restaurant. And although the menu includes tortellini,



While Henry manages the cooking and the dinner-menu choices, Dina struts her stuff with the desserts.



gnocchi, and risotto, it’s not an Italian restaurant, either. In fact, Henry is quite adamant in his refusal to be forced into one category or another, but, he cautions, he also doesn’t want to be “all things to all people.” As a default, he warily refers to the restaurant’s cuisine as “Mediterranean,” and, aside from the obvious French and Italian foundations of his cooking, his use of lentils (North Africa), couscous (Middle East), and cucumber raita (Greece) as side dishes bear this out.

Henry’s eclectic training and tastes are reflected in the complex combinations of ingredients and flavors in his dishes. What makes the Bistro Henry menu so fascinating is the way Henry plays traditional bistro comfort foods, such as steak au poivre or lamb shank, against more exotic dishes such as wild Pacific salmon with couscous, dill oil, and cucumber raita. He loves the idea of diners mixing up traditions and flavors, and being able to have a meal of a sweetbread appetizer; followed by rare tuna with sorba noodles, wasabi, pickled ginger, and soy; and finished off with a hot-fudge sundae. The standard menu is complemented by an extensive list of specials, which change seasonally.

THE DESSERTS ARE WHERE DINA gets to strut her stuff. Classic bistro items—crème brûlée and profiteroles—are accompanied by more seasonal items,

such as pear-and-blueberry crisp with Wilcox ice cream and spring Napoleon with layers of strawberry rhubarb compote and orange ginger ice. Her famous hot-fudge sauce is available by the jar, and she operates Dina’s Vermont Baking Company, which offers everything from pies to breads to wedding cakes.

As Henry and I talked in the dining room, three layers of a wedding cake cooled on a tray nearby. At one point, Dina came in to check the fondant icing covering each layer, and the way that her long, slender hands carefully smoothed the fondant reflected a deep-seated love of her craft and a sense of pride in her work.

If you’re looking for classic bistro cuisine or exciting combinations of flavors, you’ll find it at Bistro Henry. Although the cooking is often complex, the philosophy behind it is simple, as Henry explains: “I make food that I like to eat.” Chances are, you’ll feel the same way. **F**

Bistro Henry is located east of Manchester on Routes 11 and 30 (exit 4 off Route 7), on the way to Bromley and Stratton mountains. Entrees range from \$20 to \$29. Dinner is served Tuesday through Sunday in the summer and fall, Tuesday through Saturday in winter and spring, and the restaurant is closed for a few weeks during mud season. Check out the menu at www.bistrohenry.com, or call (802) 362-4982 for more information and reservations.